

Spring 2017

SMADmag

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James Madison University

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SMADmag

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

by Rachel Brianna Petty
May 2017

Accepted by the faculty of the School of Media Arts & Design, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

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Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank Dr. Gwyn Mellinger for providing me with suggestions for the project and being so supportive of SMADmag. I'm happy it will be shown to prospective students and put to good use. I'd also like to thank the School of Media Arts & Design for providing the funding to print the magazines.

Lastly, I'd like to thank the JMU Honors College for awarding me with a Madison Achievement Scholarship upon my acceptance to JMU. I have been blessed with many opportunities and experiences that I wouldn't have been without the guidance and support of the Honors College.

Essay

A year and a half ago, I had no idea what I wanted to do for my senior honors project. I knew a creative project made more sense than a thesis for my major (media arts and design), so I started brainstorming. I've always loved magazines, so why not make my own? I'm a Spanish minor, so I dabbled with the idea of creating a bilingual magazine that would serve the Harrisonburg community. But I needed a theme.

When I asked Brad Jenkins to be my project adviser, he had an idea in mind. A magazine, SMAD About You, had been published a few years back and was never kept up. There was currently no publication serving the School of Media Arts & Design, which didn't make a lot of sense to either of us. What does the school show prospective students? Of course there's a website, but we thought it needed something more. When he suggested I take on this task, I was eager to get started.

At the time, I had very limited design experience. Serving as the editor-in-chief of this magazine would require using InDesign to create layouts, which seemed like a daunting task. The spring semester of my junior year, I took the feature magazine production class, which I hoped would give me some much-needed experience. I served as the managing editor of Madison 101 magazine alongside my Breeze editor and mentor, Ashleigh Balsamo. She showed me the ropes, and slowly but surely, I became more confident in my design abilities.

Designing the magazine wasn't the only thing I had to learn. I had to conceive, assign and edit enough content to actually create this magazine. I started with a long and very broad list of ideas — alumni profiles, professor profiles, study abroad anecdotes — and I got to work on the alumni profiles. I wanted to showcase the types of jobs people can obtain once they graduate from SMAD. I asked each of the concentration heads for notable alumni in their respective

fields, and I got a great list. The SMAD alums were more than willing to help, and interviewing them was actually one of the most interesting parts of my whole project.

Hearing about where various people ended up made me excited to start my career, and I wrote the profiles in hopes that readers of the magazine would have the same reaction. I tried to get a good mix of recent and not-so-recent alumni as well as a wide range of careers — journalists, web designers, graphic designers — SMAD really has it all.

I ran into some issues along the way, as any editor does. Sometimes it was difficult to get people to get back to me, other times students who said they'd write an article bailed at the last minute. All of these things gave me real-world experience and problem-solving skills I know I'll use for the rest of my career and even my life. I had to be flexible, which I know I'll have to be in any position in my future. If a project or deadline gets changed, I'll be ready to take that on. I had to be extremely organized in order to make sure each story was on track to be done in time, which is a critical skill in the media industry. Most of all, I had to be a leader. I can undoubtedly envision using those leadership skills in my future.

Finding the right people to contribute to each section of the magazine was a big part of what I did. Although I'm a journalism concentrator, I wanted the magazine to be well-rounded and really show everything SMAD has to offer. I was very set on including an interesting class or project that represented each of the four concentrations because I felt like prospective SMAD students should see the type of work they could get to do. Crowdsourcing and talking to people within SMAD allowed me to find things like SMADfest and the ad campaign project to include in the publication.

I had to adjust the page budget, the stories that would be in the magazine and how many pages they'd each take up, I had originally set. Many stories took up more room than I thought

they would, so I had to cut a few things out and repurpose other ideas. For example, I felt like it was important to include the new SMAD studio somewhere in the magazine. Not all schools have a state-of-the-art studio, and as our studio had just been renovated, I thought we should show that off. Since there didn't end up being room for a full page or spread about the studio, I used the front and back covers of the magazine to showcase it. People looking at the magazine can get a small glimpse into what the studio looks like and what type of work we do there.

Since I didn't have a typical staff of editors working alongside me, I put a lot of pressure on myself to make sure the content of the magazine was copy edited to perfection and in its best form. It was helpful that so many SMAD students and people I worked with at The Breeze were willing to contribute to the magazine, though I still felt a lot of responsibility when it came to making sure everything was accurate and had photos to go along with it.

I am extremely happy with how the final product came out. It feels great knowing that potential students or donors will use the magazine to make their choices about what to study at JMU. Maybe a study abroad article will sway a student to come to JMU and major in SMAD, or maybe an alumna feature will inspire a student to use their SMAD skills in an unconventional field, like coding.

During a job interview the other day, I was asked: "Can you tell me about a project you've completed that you're proud of?" I didn't have to think twice before answering. Completing this project has not only taught me a whole lot about the editorial process and leadership in general, but it's given me something to show future employers. When I was a freshman, I never would have thought I'd be the editor-in-chief of a magazine, especially a magazine that would serve the entire School of Media Arts & Design.

I hope my creation of SMADmag sets the groundwork to be continued each year and updated with new SMAD faculty, achievements, study abroad trips and alumni. An honors student has already taken on the task of completing the project for next year, and I'm confident she'll do an excellent job telling the stories SMAD has to offer.

I've learned so much, both academically and about myself, through creating this project, and I'm extremely proud. I've gained crucial editorial and design skills, learned how to manage a team and, perhaps most importantly, gained confidence that I can take on whatever projects the world may throw at me. I'm excited to see what comes next.

The magazine of James Madison University's School of Media Arts & Design

SMA Dmag

2017-2018

Cultivating greatness

See where alums are today

p. 4

Something for everyone

Learn about the concentrations

p. 8

Adventures abroad

Students reflect on their travels

p. 20

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Letter from the editor



Dear reader,

Thank you for picking up a copy of SMADmag. This project began as a rough idea and has turned into something I'm very proud of. I wanted to create a magazine that would showcase all the amazing work we do in the School of Media Arts & Design.

Whether students are interested in writing, video, advertising or graphics, I believe SMAD has something for them. From amazing alumni to student and professor projects, SMAD has turned from a school into a community. SMAD students have even traveled across the globe to continue learning and doing what they love.

This magazine is an example of a project you have the ability to create in SMAD. I hope it brings even a small taste of what SMAD is – creative, inspiring, hardworking and a place I'm happy to have called home these past four years.

Sincerely,

Rachel Petty ('17)

We are SMAD

BY RACHEL PETTY ('17)

Danny Finnegan '84

You don't become the publisher and editor of a major newspaper overnight. Danny Finnegan has been in journalism for more than 30 years. He's currently the publisher and editor of the Greensboro News & Record and Greensboro.com.

"I've only been here for four months [in November] and am still trying to learn how to balance the publisher and editor roles," he said. "Before moving to Greensboro, I spent more than 28 years at the Richmond Times-Dispatch, including five years as the editor."

Finnegan had many homes when he was younger, but graduated from Hampton (Va.) High School before coming to JMU.

"I chose JMU because of its Mass Comm program, and its Journalism concentration, in particular," he said. "I also loved the campus – it was just starting to spill across I-81 at that point – and felt it was far enough away

from home without being so far I couldn't make it home when I wanted."

The Mass Comm program set his career in motion. In addition to having knowledgeable professors, Finnegan worked for The Breeze.

"All that time at The Breeze really prepared me for my first job as a sports writer at the Daily Progress in Charlottesville," he said.

He urges journalism students to not be discouraged by the changes the field is undergoing.

"I remember when I started professionally in 1984 that people told me there was no future in journalism," he said. "In the 32 years since, I've dealt with profound changes (computers, the internet, mobile phones) and I've survived some difficult times."

Passion for the business will keep you going, Finnegan said. He shared some final words to live by: "Everybody needs an editor."



Jena Frick '14



Being on the air came naturally for Jena Frick from Ellicott City, Maryland. Frick works as the morning show producer for WJZ-TV in Baltimore. She completed an internship at WHSV, a local news station in Harrisonburg, while she was a student, which allowed her to use her skills in a professional setting.

One of the main reasons she decided to come to JMU was because of SMAD.

"I was going to go to Elon, which has a really great journalism and broadcasting program, but when I sat down and compared their program with SMAD, I thought that SMAD was a much better fit for me," she said. "I really liked that SMAD was separate from the communications major at JMU, and had a concentration geared specifically toward journalism."

The Journalism concentration allowed Frick to take classes in copy editing, news

writing, feature writing, photojournalism, news broadcasting and more. "All of these classes helped my to be a well-rounded journalist and writer, which made me a stronger candidate when applying for jobs," she said.

She put her skills to the test in the classroom.

"My favorite class was SMAD 409 because we got to produce a 30 minute news broadcast every week," she said. "I got to experience all the roles in a newsroom from an anchor to a producer to a camera operator."

Frick started Maddy Night Live, a JMU comedy troupe, at JMU and is looking for her perfect job, which melds comedy writing and TV production.

"The dream is to work on one of the late night shows or 'Good Morning America,'" she said.

Ashley Walkley '03

With a brother and sister who went to JMU, it wasn't a difficult choice for Ashley Walkley, a Yorktown, Virginia, native, to become a Duke.

"I spent some time at JMU and I really wanted a great in-state university," she said.

SMAD "was exactly what I was looking for," she said. "It was the perfect hybrid between technology, communications, design and branding all mixed into one, with just enough business sprinkled in."

Walkley graduated from SMAD with a concentration in Corporate Communications.

Walkley currently works as the director of brand and strategic initiatives at Dogeared, a global accessories brand based in Los Angeles.

"Dogeared has been a tremendous company to work for," she said. "Since I've been here, we've grown top-line revenue by more than 20 percent."

In addition to overseeing the company's

strategic growth opportunities and brand positioning, Walkley writes and prepares all of the company's talking points and serves as a key spokeswoman. She credits her success to the SMAD program – she even started a small consulting group through Dr. JoAnne Holman her senior year with a non-profit in Harrisonburg.

"During our final semester and just after graduation, we worked with the company to reposition their brand with updated marketing materials," Walkley said.

Down the line, Walkley sees herself starting her own company or consulting for brands.

"I feel well prepared in terms of continuing to grow and build companies," she said. "I wouldn't be in the position I'm in and be able to continue to grow my career without having had the training, education and expertise of the teachers and professors in the SMAD program who helped shape that path."



Claire Molinaro '09



Claire Molinaro, a Norfolk, Virginia, native, used her skills in communication and design to land a job at AOL in New York City, working with brands and sales to develop sponsorship packages.

"I'm fortunate to work at a company where work-life balance is encouraged and very attainable," she said. AOL is a global company, so Molinaro uses technology to stay in touch with teams around the country.

Molinaro's hands-on experience in SMAD helped when it was time to apply for jobs. She concentrated in Corporate Communications (now Creative Advertising) and really enjoyed the integration of writing, traditional marketing models and using the newest technology.

"I graduated feeling very prepared with a basic understanding of the advertising world I would soon enter," she said. "In hindsight, Corporate Comm was much

more versatile than I realized; I could have leveraged my degree to go in many different directions."

Having a diverse set of skills is crucial in this industry.

"I plan to advance from managing multiple content brands to also managing a team," she said. "I'm also interested in exploring the technology side of the house or the start-up products we develop here. I'd also love to take advantage of AOL's global presence and move to a different office for a few years."

Molinaro advises taking advantage of everything you can in college to acquire real-world experience and narrow down your interests.

"It's important to remain flexible in your career pathing, and well-versed in new technology, products and platforms, so that you're able to evolve with your company and within your industry," she said.

Kara McGuirk-Allison '95

"By the age of 28, I had my dream job," said Kara McGuirk-Allison, "and it would never have happened without the connections and foundation I received from JMU."

A public radio veteran, she has applied her production talents to diverse National Public Radio offerings, from "Justice Talking" to "Weekend Edition." Today, McGuirk-Allison is producer of the NPR podcast "Hidden Brain." The program's exploration of social science research aims to help people "understand the world – and themselves."

The seed that blossomed into McGuirk-Allison's career took root on the Madison campus. Transferring to JMU in her sophomore year, the mass communications major began working at the student-run radio station, WXJM.

"Because of JMU, my whole career trajectory changed," said McGuirk-Allison. "The NPR affiliate WMRA supervised WXJM during my time there. I became the general manager at WXJM in my senior year. Through that experience, I was shown how public radio works. I fell in love with college radio, educational radio and public radio. I knew that was what I wanted to do with my life."

She described Vedantam, the host of NPR's "Hidden Brain" podcast, as "very rigorous," with "an encyclopedic knowledge about topics." Coupling his exactitude with "those of us who are generalists allows for good storytelling," she said. "That's our goal: to teach people through good storytelling something about social science that they can apply to their everyday lives."

"Podcasts are really enjoying a moment," she said. While she

acknowledges that there's a lot to learn about this emerging technology, she's happy to be involved: "It's been great to be in the forefront and working with really good people to make it happen."

Despite the hectic nature of her job – editing, scripting and producing, all at lightning speed – McGuirk-Allison is clearly thriving. "I'm always challenged and always learning something new," she says. "You always have to be on your 'A' game."



STORY BY JAN GILLIS ('07)
PHOTO BY MIKE MIRIELLO ('09M)

This is a condensed version of a story printed in the Spring/Summer 2016 edition of Madison magazine.

David Gorton '13



David Gorton knew he wanted to pursue a video-related career. He landed a job as a video producer at Avotek, a company that supplies training materials like books, videos, test guides and system trainers to students and schools for aviation maintenance.

"I don't really have a typical day, which is one of the things I like about this field," he said. "Some days I shoot video, some days I edit, some days I make animations. We customize a lot of our products for the specific customer, so every product is a little bit different than the last."

Gorton grew up in Harrisonburg and had the Dukes in his blood – both his parents went to JMU. After taking a broadcasting class in high school, Gorton decided that

majoring in SMAD and concentrating in DVC would be perfect.

"DVC was a lot of fun for me," he said. "If you like video editing, you'll like DVC. There are a lot of talented and creative students and faculty in the program and they all help each other grow. It's really nice to have people to talk to about various ideas and figure out what works and what doesn't work."

Gorton mentioned that SMAD allowed him to tailor his classes to what he always wanted to do, and the faculty helped him develop an eye for details – a great skill to have in the video industry.

"I don't think too much about the future," he said. "I like what I do and just try to go along with whatever each day brings."

Brad Frost '07

Brad Frost, from Oil City, Pennsylvania, began his JMU experience as a music major.

"To have a music major you had to play an instrument, which meant tons of time practicing, attending recitals and performing," he said. "While I'm a musician myself, I was more interested in the music industry and recording side of things. I found out that I'd be able to take more music industry classes as a minor than as a music industry major."

Frost currently owns his own business, where he does "a bunch of web-related things."

"Basically, I make websites and help others do the same," he said. "That involves doing frontend web development work for clients, consulting with organizations to help their teams work better together, speaking at conferences, writing blog posts and books and conducting workshops at conferences and organizations."

Frost decided the SMAD program would be a good blend of artistic and technical skills. He concentrated in Converged Media (now Interactive Design).

The web whiz is focused on getting his book, "Atomic Design," a methodology for creating design systems, out the door.

"At this stage in the game, I consider myself to be pretty unemployable so hopefully I'll continue to run my business and travel around talking about the things I love," he said.

The SMAD program helped Frost get his foot in the door.

"It was a good blend of practical and analytical information, and it did a good job at exposing everyone to different kinds of software people in the field would be expected to use," he said.



Kelly Ford '14

Most people study abroad during their sophomore or junior years. But Kelly Ford completed her final semester in London.

"It was hands down the best part of my JMU experience because it led me to my job now," she said. Ford works as the digital creative designer for Weller Media Agency, a global media agency with offices in London, New York and Los Angeles.

Ford was Weller's first U.S. employee and sees herself relocating to help build Weller's creative office in Los Angeles. "I've been in New York my entire life, and I'm ready to experience something new." Ford grew up in five cities throughout Westchester County, but considers Harrison, New York, her home.

"I create graphics and animations for our clients' social media campaigns and I also do website design, brand development and sometimes tour merchandise and set design," Ford said. "Some of our clients include Republic Records, Ellie Goulding, Disney, BØRNS, Viber and Vevo."

Ford spends a third of her typical day in meetings and the other two-thirds on Adobe suite. "Some days it's up to 20 social media posts," she said. "Some days it's website updates and tour posters. Anything from lyric videos to Snapchat filters, Instagram grids and motion graphic animations, it just depends on what our clients have going on."

"I decided to apply to JMU because the SMAD offering was unlike any other curriculum at the other schools I was interested in, in that I could combine my interest in writing with my interest of design," she said.

Concentrating in Converged Media (now Interactive Design) allowed Ford to take classes in both print and web design. "I have found that it is far more beneficial to have a working knowledge of both design worlds as they often overlap professionally," she said.

SMAD laid the groundwork for what Ford needed to know post-grad. "I am, however, a full believer that one needs to fill their extra time with volunteer work, jobs, campus organizations and more to really be prepared for life after college," she said.

The future isn't clear for Ford, but she stresses doing "what makes you happy." Whether she becomes a teacher, starts a design firm or pursues one of her side projects doesn't matter. "You can always start something new."



SMAD through our eyes

Journalism

Media & Politics course especially relevant during 2016 election



GRAPHIC BY CHELSEA CROUCH ('17)

BY KAITLYN MILLER ('17)

Media and Politics is one of the few SMAD classes that isn't exclusively for SMAD students. Taught by Professor JoAnne Holman, it's also a communications and political science class that focuses on political communication throughout American history. Being in a SMAD class filled with non-smaddies has some benefits: We're forced to think in ways we're not accustomed to, and we don't just look at politics from the standpoint of media creators, but also from the view of campaign managers, fact-checkers, consumers and academics.

The class focuses on the ways the American government communicates to its citizens. We look at a history of political communications dating all the way back to pre-colonization, before concentrating on the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Because new media is so visual, there is a lot of viewing

and reflecting: watching news clips, documentaries and television spots before discussing the efficacy of each. We often think that political communications has changed drastically in the last decade because of the internet and social media. The reality is that the content and theories of communicating to constituents is still very similar to how they were in the 1970s and '80s, even if the medium has changed.

Being in the class during a presidential election year was interesting because we see the class curriculum playing out in real life. We rarely look at examples from within the past year, but being able to apply the lessons we've learned sheds a new light on the election cycle. This class wasn't required or even aimed at my concentration, but it's one of those classes I'll be reflecting on years after I've graduated.

Creative Advertising

(formerly Integrated Advertising and Corporate Communication)

Real-life ad campaign takes students from idea to execution

BY PATRICK MCGRATH

The Creative Advertising concentration within SMAD is both challenging and exciting. I've not only learned theoretical knowledge behind the logistics of running advertising campaigns, but I've also gained practical experience through the creation of a campaign.

One of the best examples of this was through the SMAD 342: Creativity in Advertising and Corporate Communication class. In this class, we were assigned to both brainstorm and produce an entire advertising campaign as a semester-long project. The class was split up into three different groups of students, with different project approaches, and each group organizing their own creatively unique campaign themes.

When we began the project, we were given the Shenandoah Valley Scholars' Latino Initiative (SV-SLI) as our client. For those who are unfamiliar with SV-SLI, it's an organization started by JMU SCOM professor Carlos Alemán, which provides Latino high school students in the Shenandoah Valley area with guidance, leadership and monetary awards to promote and encourage the pursuit of their college dreams. For SV-SLI, we were tasked with creating more awareness of the organization in the local community, renovating its online presence, and enticing potential donors who would financially support the organization.

The process of creating the advertising campaign, however, was broken down into multiple sections. The project included a fact sheet, press release, consumer profile, radio advertisement, TV advertisement, print advertisement, billboard advertisement and a social media creative piece. Each week, we were given a new section to work on, and by the end of the week, a draft was due. After receiving recommendations and revisions of the drafts from our professor, we were then tasked with producing the advertisements. For example, for the TV advertisement, we created a written script and storyboard of the commercial as our draft, and then filmed, edited and



ADVERTISEMENT CREATED BY RACHEL OWENS ('17)

produced the commercial for our final submission. The same process was done for the other advertising pieces as well.

At the end of the semester, each group presented their final campaigns to the class, to the professor, and to the director of SV-SLI, Professor Alemán. This, in my opinion, was one of the best parts of the project. It was not only meant for educational purposes, but it was also meant to be used by SV-SLI in the future. The fact that our work will be used to give back to the local community is humbling.

Overall, I found the advertising campaign project to be incredibly rewarding and worthwhile. Because we worked in groups of students, I learned how to both work effectively in a group and how to manage differences among group members, which is especially important considering the group-oriented nature of the advertising profession. Additionally, this project has become the centerpiece for my portfolio. During interviews for internships in the advertising field, having the physical copy of the campaign that my group and I produced has set me apart from the competition.

Digital Video and Cinema

SMADFest brings student films to the big screen



PHOTO BY ALEXIS MILLER ('19)

BY AMY TALIAFERRO ('16)

Have you ever said to yourself, "I feel like enduring four months of immense stress and emotional chaos with an end product that will propel me through another few weeks of emotional chaos, and I think I'm going to do it on the cusp of graduation when I have a million other things to worry about?" If you have, then you understand what it's like to throw yourself into a project wholeheartedly.

That's the concept of SMADFest, a short film festival put on every semester by the School of Media Arts & Design. Each semester, seniors enrolled in SMAD 405 produce short films that are premiered at this event during final exam week. The students' purposes for this vary — some want the exposure, some want the structured environment of a class that mandates a project of this size and some

just love making movies.

Being a part of this class and part of SMADFest has been a long-time goal of mine. Last fall, I worked alongside a group in 405 on their short film "On The Run" as their production assistant. I was on set for every shoot and helped the director of photography with audio and lighting for each scene. This year, I'm the writer, producer and director of photography for my film "The Short," a mockumentary comedy about four students entered in a film competition (so meta). Principal photography began in mid-October, and my group and I are excited about the footage we have so far.

Between last year and this year, being a part of SMADFest has been quite a whirlwind. It's full of emotional chaos — from

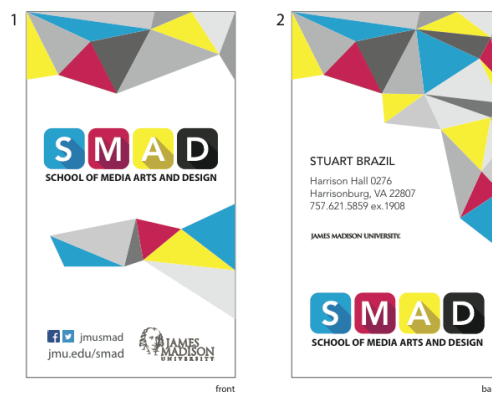
being excited about where your film is going to absolutely freaking out because things are quickly falling apart. It has included long nights of working through every single scene in terms of what props or costumes we need, scheduling a day to shoot that works with all of your actors and the group, and finding a location to film the scene that will have the least constraints on time and area needed.

I wouldn't trade these experiences for anything else. As much of a headache as filmmaking can be, it's the opportunity of a lifetime that you can't find anywhere else. That's essentially what SMADFest teaches us: The end product is absolutely worth the struggle.

SMADFest will take place on May 2 from 6-9 p.m. in Grafton-Stovall Theater.

Interactive Design (formerly Converged Media)

Logo project gives students a chance to brand SMAD



BY STUART BRAZIL ('17)

One of my courses this semester is SMAD 332, Print Communication Design. It will help me develop my visual design skills as well as contribute to my portfolio. One of our projects was a total rebranding of SMAD. We had to create logos and business cards that conveyed a completely new image of the School of Media Arts & Design. I was excited to start this project because I definitely thought the SMAD image could use an update.

My first step for this project started in my sketchbook. I like to throw all of my ideas onto a piece of paper, no matter how good or bad they are, without having to worry about technical issues on a computer or in the editing programs. After I've initially got some ideas and rough sketches, that's when I'll move to the computer and start to play around with my best ideas. I mainly used Adobe Illustrator. My next few steps were playing around with different styles and layouts, colors and sizing, and eventually

ending up with a few suitable versions of a logo. Then, I tried to narrow it down to only two logo drafts. This is where the in-class critiques happened. I love feedback on my work because I think that's where I learn where I can improve and what's working well already. After critiques, it's usually obvious which one of the two drafts is going to move forward. Then, I make some final adjustments and settle on a final logo. The next portion of the project was designing a few different versions of business cards. I pretty much used the same process for this and came up with a few versions.

This project helped me develop my visual design skills as well as my branding techniques. I'm also excited because I think this logo and branding project makes for a strong portfolio piece. I would encourage anyone considering taking SMAD 332 to pursue it, especially if you're looking to sharpen these skills.

Meet SMAD's new director

Q&A BY BRAD JENKINS ('99)



PHOTO BY MARK OWEN ('17)

Dr. Gwyneth Mellinger joined JMU as the School of Media Arts & Design's director in July 2016. Most recently, she was the chair of the Department of Communication Arts and an associate professor of communications arts at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Her teaching and research interests focus on communication ethics, media and identity, and media and democracy. Her book, "Chasing Newsroom Diversity: From Jim Crow to Affirmative Action," received the Frank Luther Mott Kappa Tau Alpha Award for the best research-based book in mass communication. She is working on a second book examining racism and journalistic objectivity during the Civil Rights Movement.

Dr. Mellinger earned her Ph.D. in American Studies from Kansas University and master's degrees in English and journalism and a B.A. from Mills College. Before embarking on an academic career, she worked as a journalist and was a regular political columnist.

What attracted you to JMU and the School of Media Arts & Design?

JMU and SMAD have strong reputations that extend far beyond the region, and the focuses on both the liberal arts and critical thinking contribute mightily to that. SMAD builds on those strengths by providing its students with an education in cutting-edge media, allowing its graduates to enter the workplace with analytical and technical skills, as well as an understanding of the world around them. This is a powerful combination.

I am impressed that our students understand they are part of something special here. In my first meeting with SMAD majors, students spoke passionately of their commitment to the school and their appreciation for its mission and curriculum. SMAD students recognize that they are receiving a meaningful education that will distinguish them from their peers when they leave the university.

What are some of your immediate plans for the school?

I have been asked to lead a strategic planning process and to review the SMAD assessment plan, but I have no specific agenda. I will be spending time with faculty and students, listening to their ideas about curriculum and co-curricular opportunities, such as student media, and internships. Collaboration and strategic-plan development will chart our course moving forward.

One of your areas of interest is media and democracy. Given that we just ended a presidential election year, what's your take on the media's role in the process this go-round?

Social media provide immense opportunities for citizen journalism and information sharing by campaigns and other partisans. At the same time, social media allow professional journalists to disseminate news quickly and continuously. In this election cycle, in which public discourse is notably lacking in accuracy and civility, trained journalists have an opportunity to model professionalism, provide accurate accounts and serve as fact-checkers for social-media content. We will probably see with hindsight that this election cycle was pivotal in defining the role of professional media in the democratic process.

You're working on a book on journalistic objectivity and racism during the Civil Rights Era. What's the gist of this work?

While I was researching my first book, "Chasing Newsroom Diversity: From Jim Crow to Affirmative Action" (Illinois, 2013), I noticed that many white newspaper editors of the 1950s and 1960s were preoccupied with the question of objectivity within a racial context, and I began taking notes. For example, the African-American press was thought to lack objectivity because it advocated civil rights. At the same time, the objectivity of white-owned newspapers that advocated segregation was not questioned. Even though the concept of journalistic objectivity had been challenged as an unattainable ideal, the issue of objectivity was used to discredit journalism that challenged the racial status quo. I will finish the research for this project in the fall and will begin writing in 2017.

You've done some research on Twitter; what's your take on the role of social media and how SMAD can help students navigate new media practices?

I am convinced that students will be best prepared to navigate new media practices if they have a clear understanding of the contexts in which they are circulating information. Priorities would be a deep appreciation for the social and political obligations of the media practitioner, specifically the democratic potential of new media and the ethical implications of the information they disseminate. This takes us back to SMAD's emphasis on a broad grounding in the liberal arts and critical thinking, alongside a strong foundation in the technical and theoretical demands of the media.

Much of your research has been about journalism history. How would you describe the era of media we are in now versus where we have been?

This is a difficult question to answer because the term "media" now contains such a diversity of technology, content creators and audiences. We are well along in a transition from news and information that had a decidedly local, state or national focus and audience to news and information that speak to publics defined by something other than geography and political boundaries. An example of the latter would be a list of social-media followers that is narrowly defined by an affiliation (maybe even a self-proclaimed affiliation) with the social-media user, but which includes people from all over the country or world.

We also have moved away from edited information, controlled by gatekeepers and agenda setters, and metered out at specific times of the day. Back then, the only opportunity for interactivity was a letter to the editor. The changes are pervasive and are altering our sensibilities about what it means to be a political actor and even where we define the boundaries of the society in which we live. When historians study our moment in journalism, they may conclude that changes set in motion by the internet had a greater impact on human culture than movable type. Though change of this order can be frightening, this is an incredibly exciting time to be involved in the media.

Filming her way home

BY EMMY FREEDMAN ('17) AND JULIA NELSON ('17)



PHOTO BY JILLIAN WRIGHT ('18)

Imelda O'Reilly (left) in the classroom with some of her students. O'Reilly began teaching for SMAD in August 2016.

Imelda O'Reilly believes that home can be several places.

"Ireland's a small country, but for a small country it makes a lot of noise," said O'Reilly, one of the newest additions to the media arts and design faculty.

She's describing her home country, but it's also indicative of her as a person: She's lived on four continents and has written and directed numerous films, such as her shorts "Lilly in the Woods" and "Eggs and Soldiers." Now she's starting the next chapter of her life at JMU, teaching Film as Art and Screenplay Writing.

"The students are so engaging," O'Reilly said. "I was very impressed that not only are they on time, but early for class."

Her students have found her presence positive as well.

"Having a class with a new professor is always really exciting because they could take the course in any direction they want to," said senior media arts and design major Kyle Johnson, who's in her Film as Art course. "I really want to watch her films now. I guess that'll give me a better insight into her personality and the way that she approaches film."

Dolores Flamiano, who was serving as interim director of SMAD

while potential new faculty members were being interviewed, was drawn to O'Reilly's warmth and creativity during the interview process.

"I'm very excited for SMAD students to have the opportunity to have that international perspective from someone who's done work in the corporate area as well as independent documentaries," Flamiano said. "So sort of the range of work that they might be doing when they go into the real world."

When O'Reilly lived in Ireland, it was right before the Celtic Tiger era, a time of vast economic growth at the turn of the century. Before the boom, there weren't many job opportunities for people her age so she, along with many of her peers, moved to the United States. She ended up in New York City to study at Queens College, City University of New York, where she studied film.

"I come from a storytelling culture," O'Reilly said. "I was always interested in film, but then I got more interested in theater for a while, but then came back to film. I love telling stories, and film just offered me a bigger canvas to play upon."

She spent many years living and performing in New York City and later taught in New York University's graduate film program in Singapore. But, upon its discontinuation, she made her way to Harrisonburg.

"I like to help other people tell their stories while also pursuing my own storytelling," O'Reilly said.

O'Reilly's artistic talent doesn't end with acting, directing or even filmmaking. After she graduated, she formed a group of Irish women called the Banshees who would perform gigs of various talents together in downtown New York. Her act was reading her own poetry set to music.

"We all did different things," O'Reilly said. "We built this grassroots following and an NYU student ended up making a documentary on us. It was a really great collective and empowering as women."

After a few years of acting in New York City, O'Reilly decided to pursue film school and enrolled at Columbia University. It was there that she developed her brainchild, "Bricks, Beds and Sheep's Heads," a 13-minute short film about a Moroccan Muslim immigrant. In 2008, she received a grant from the Fulbright Scholar program to spend a year and a half in Morocco, where she immersed herself in their language and culture to further authenticate her film.

"I experienced it as a very warm culture," O'Reilly said. "I'd go to the local 'hanute' [market] to buy some milk and they'd just say, 'Pay me tomorrow.'"

The film was a regional finalist for the Student Academy Awards and is currently touring in Mexico.

Now that she's back to pursuing her passion for teaching, O'Reilly would like to continue finding homes in other places by potentially taking JMU students abroad. She believes that travel is an important part of education and a huge inspiration for good storytelling.

"I'm planning my next trip," O'Reilly said. "I want to go to Iceland, Vienna, Budapest."

But for now, she's perfectly at home in Harrisonburg.

"I've noticed on my walks that you can see the sunset," O'Reilly said. "In New York, I didn't get to see the sunset because of all the tall buildings. But in Harrisonburg, it's so vibrant and beautiful. So that's a real gift."



A screenshot from one of O'Reilly's films, "Eggs and Soldiers."

Q&A

BY BRAD JENKINS ('99)

What drew you to SMAD?

JMU has an amazing study-abroad program, and as I looked into the curriculum, I was impressed with the choices available and the extent of the program. As an international filmmaker, this is one of the unique aspects of the program that attracted me. I previously taught for three years as an assistant professor at the NYU graduate film program in Singapore, TischAsia. This illustrated to me the benefits for students to make films while combining travel with study-abroad programs.

What can students expect from you as a teacher? How do you approach the classroom setting?

I am a process-oriented teacher, which means each of you as students are unique individuals and you all learn in a different way. As a director or filmmaker working with actors, it is my job to connect with each actor individually and coach them to give their best performance. As an educator in a college setting, it is my job to coach each individual student to perform to the best of their ability. Every student blossoms in his or her own time.

What do you see as the seeds of your creativity and work as a writer?

For me, ideas come in fragments. Sometimes it begins with an image, a song or a line of dialogue. Seldom does it come all at once. Through working and writing and tapping into the subconscious on a daily basis, you allow your imagination to grow. Besides dream time and feeding your art, it is necessary to accompany this with a rigor and discipline in order to create a solid system of making work. This process is different for everyone, but you must tune into your own method of working and set up your own discipline.

My ideas come from my dreams, my life experience, my struggles and my engagement in life as an individual, educator and as an artist.

How did your childhood fuel your imagination?

As a child growing up in Catholic Ireland, I spent a lot of time climbing trees and dreaming myself out of the countryside. I invented characters and created stories, shaping a fictional universe they could inhabit. It is this transcendental space that drew me into a point of creating my own work process and practice. I believe creating is a form of meditation.

As an Irish immigrant, I am an outsider living inside the American culture. This creates a gap in expectation that might be considered a disadvantage, but in terms of storytelling it has helped me with my work. It evokes objectivity and empathy. I try to incorporate this perspective into my films where I transfix my viewers into double meanings, metaphor and humor.



PHOTOS BY SHAUN WRIGHT

An eye for the blind

SMAD professors team up to create documentary about blind woodworker in Harrisonburg

BY SAMMY CRISCITELLO ('18)

In addition to working full time as professors in JMU's School of Media Arts & Design, Michael Grundmann and Shaun Wright look to capture novel stories around the community through creating documentary films. On January 31, 2017, the duo's film, "A Good Blinder," premiered at Court Square Theater in downtown Harrisonburg, and will subsequently be showed at various film festivals.

The documentary depicts the life of Dan Bowman, a blind woodworker and piano tuner in Harrisonburg, and how he has overcome his impairment to produce high-quality work since the 1970s. Grundmann was responsible for interviewing Bowman and running the sound, while Wright manned the camera and served as a co-editor.

The co-producers have created several documentaries of their own throughout their professional careers, but "A Good Blinder" posed a challenge that neither had faced before.

"I've never made something for someone who couldn't see it," Wright said. "We'd edit a scene and I'd sit back and close my eyes and just listen to it and try to think about Dan and how he would be taking the story in, and making sure there weren't key things there that Dan would miss."

The two first learned of Bowman's unique skill set through SMAD professor Kevin Reynolds, the husband of Laurie Kutchins, an English professor at JMU, who has her piano tuned by Bowman. Shooting for the project began two and a half years ago, and the two compiled over 30 hours of footage which they cut into a 30 minute documentary last summer.

The documentary examines how Bowman has faced the challenge of being blind since his retinas detached when he was 12 – an unfixable ailment in 1953 that can now be treated. was treatable when the same happened his daughter. Bowman began woodworking when he was 6 or 7 years old, as he and his brother frequently designed products cobbled together projects made of wood or metal scraps he they found around the dairy farm where he the family of 11 grew up on the outskirts of Harrisonburg.

"At first, when you hear of a blind guy woodworking, you think, 'That seems really difficult,' and maybe suspect the quality of work," Wright said. "Then you see his level of craftsmanship and what he's doing and realize the handicap he has is really unbelievable."

Despite being unable to see his work in progress, Bowman uses electric power tools such as a table saw or sanding belt [delete] that can "take your arm off" if you're not careful, according to Grundmann.

Even more impressively, Bowman's tolerances are down to three-thousandths of an inch – meaning you can barely feel where a joint is made. He is well-rewarded for his elite craftsmanship, as last year he sold Last year, his latest creation sold for \$1,000 at the annual Virginia Mennonite Relief Sale at the county fairgrounds – a philanthropic event that donates its proceeds to refugee relief. Bowman's other work has sold for upward of \$3,000, such as a marble roller he carefully created.

Aside from his professional accomplishments, the two set out to capture Bowman's witty character.

"There is a funny part where he's changing the knives in his planer and realizes his fingers are wet and says, 'Oh, I've got blood,' so he's got to rush upstairs and have his wife put a bandaid on," Grundmann said.

Grundmann and Wright faced challenges of their own in their attempt to adequately tell Bowman's story.

"The process of filmmaking is so much Murphy's Law, it seems like half the challenge is keeping variables out of the shot – unwanted noise next door, distracting elements in the frame, even verbal flubs like unfinished sentences," Grundmann said.

Grundmann felt that editing the documentary to eliminate these miscues was the most complex process of the project. He believes editing documentaries serves a role similar to directing in fictional movies.

"Our process was mostly from the fishing expedition school of documentary filmmaking, which is, 'Let's just start shooting and follow him around, whatever it is that he's doing, and let's keep going until we feel we have enough to really capture him,'" Grundmann said.

The moment they knew they had succeeded was when they screened it for Bowman and his wife.

"He was never thrown off or lost," Wright said. "He only had two or three questions for his wife, and when we got done he said, 'I don't mean to sound egotistical, but I wish there was more.' We wanted to feel like we were doing justice to his story and his life, and they were both very happy with it."

Wright offers a piece of advice for prospective SMAD students who aspire to share in the art of documentary filmmaking.

"Making a documentary is just like making any film, but you don't have control. If you've never done one before, do a small one. There are stories everywhere. You don't need to go off to other countries. Sometimes you can really have an interesting look at what on the surface seems like a simple story."

Beyond the workplace

SMAD and computer science alumna advocates
for women and children in technology



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LAUREN GIBBS

Lauren Gibbs ('15), participated in the College for Kids program while at JMU. She finds coding to be "wildly creative."

BY RACHEL PETTY ('17)

When Lauren Gibbs, a Roanoke, Virginia, native, was applying for jobs, she was having a hard time deciding whether to pursue a job in media arts or computer science, her two majors.

ChartIQ, a financial charting and data visualization startup, ended up being the perfect place for her to meld the two fields.

Gibbs works as a software engineer for the company. She has also helped with internal logos, content and commercial items, in addition to attending many events on behalf of the company. She describes the startup as results-driven and challenging.

"I've never had to teach myself so much stuff from scratch in my entire life," she said. "If I run into a problem, sometimes there's no Googling it. I need to sit down and get focused and figure it out. And it's really rewarding to essentially be your own Google."

While she spends her days coding, she's planning to start a nonprofit after-school or weekend program for kids to introduce them to the basics of coding.

"I just think the tech industry is not nearly diverse enough and I think part of that problem is that children don't necessarily get exposed to it soon enough to explore it as something they might

potentially be interested in," she said.

Gibbs thinks it's important for kids to explore different walks of life early on, and she doesn't feel as though there are enough opportunities for them to explore programming.

She regrets not being introduced to coding earlier herself – there were no opportunities for it. She received a Google travel grant that sent her to the Grace Hopper women in technology conference in Houston, where she met people who started nonprofits and businesses and was able to get advice on how to kick off her program, which she's looking into starting in the Shenandoah Valley in the next five to ten years.

"This is really just a dream of mine, but so was getting a double major degree at JMU," she said.

Gibbs concentrated in integrated advertising and corporate communication (now creative advertising) and graduated in 2015. When she was applying for college, she was frustrated when she found that many programs were too business or art focused.

"I wasn't looking to be an entrepreneur or an artist, so I needed something in the middle, and SMAD seemed to be the perfect

balance of the two,” she said.

While waiting to get accepted into SMAD, Gibbs filled her time with computer classes – and just never dropped it. She claims to like the two subjects equally, but for “very, very different reasons.” Computer science allows her to get into her own head and challenge herself, while she finds SMAD to be more about thinking about other people and society.

“My experience in media arts and design allows me to think in ways someone who has exercised their creativity less probably won’t think,” she said. “Believe it or not, writing code can be wildly creative (or it can not be if you don’t want to think that way), and there are a million ways to solve any one problem in the computer science world.”

While at JMU, Gibbs was involved outside the classroom. She was a member of Women in Technology, advocating for what she likes to call diversity in technology.

“I always thought that advocating for women in technology was a little bit superficial, but it’s really important,” she said. “I don’t feel like I’m advocating for specifically women in technology. Whenever I do an event, I feel like I’m advocating for diversity in technology, and I just happen to be the face of women in technology.”

Gibbs feels having diversity in the workplace positively affects the product you’re working on.

“No matter how hard I try, I as a young white woman, am not going to think the same as maybe a slightly older African-American woman or male, for that matter,” she said.

She was also a member of a competitive programming club and participated in College for Kids, a program where she came with lesson plans, chose a textbook and assigned semester-long projects for 9- to 13-year-olds.

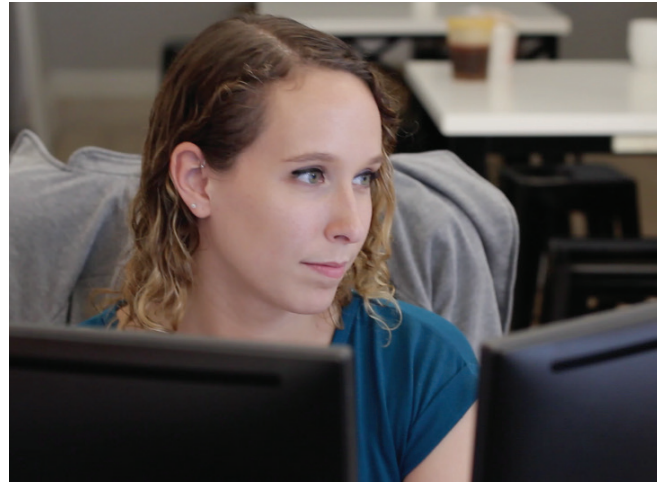
“Kids are really amazingly talented if you give them the opportunity to be,” she said.

SMAD and computer science sounds like an interesting mix, but Gibbs makes it work.

“If you allow your creativity to run free, you can end up developing some seriously great things that are not only well made, but are also insanely efficient and beautiful,” she said.

Her takeaway?

“The connections I made in SMAD are still connections I have and utilize to this day,” she said. “JMU and SMAD sculpts greatness out of anyone, I think, if they stick with it.”



Gibbs works at ChartIQ, a financial charting startup.



Gibbs at the Grace Hopper women in technology conference.



All eyes are on Gibbs as she teaches kids the basics of coding.



Gibbs doesn’t mind spending her days at the computer.

SMAD around the world

Life in Los Angeles

BY MIKE DOLZER ('18)

Last summer I was able to rub elbows with celebrities, be on national TV shows and advance my career in the heart of the entertainment industry. As clichéd as this sounds, the JMU in L.A. program is one of the best things that ever happened to me.

JMU in L.A. is a two-month summer program in Los Angeles. While L.A. isn't quite "abroad," it did feel like an entirely new world to someone who had never even been on a plane before.

The program has two three-credit classes where we learn the ins and outs of Hollywood from industry insiders who graduated from JMU, as well as a three-credit internship you find on your own. For my internship, I worked as a writer and social media personality for Young Hollywood, an entertainment media outlet geared toward teenagers.

The writing style was very different than what I was used to. In Harrisonburg, I wrote about topics such as mental illness in prison and the inherent racism the native community faces. Writing about perky pop stars was a large departure from what I was used to, but they still had an impact in terms of adding to the entertainment industry conversation. It was important to me to learn a totally new style of writing that I couldn't take on quite as fully in Virginia.

Aside from my writing, I was allowed to host a few of the Snapchat streams at events. Snapchat hosting primarily involves giving little intros and transitions to give context to videos and photos from a specific event. Also known as a Snapchat takeover, I was able to be the face of the Young Hollywood stream for marquee experiences such as the LA Swim Week Fashion Show and VidCon.

Largely left to my own devices at these events, I got to see firsthand what it's like being a part of the press when big occasions happen: running around trying to get good shots, using my press clearance to get in restricted areas and being a part of the amazing environment that's a hopping event. I will forever be grateful to Young Hollywood for allowing me to jump right into the field with these events and truly feel like a member of the Hollywood press.

The professors were guardian angels who ensured that we were happy and learning, while the other students on the trip quickly became my family. If you have any inkling of wanting to work in the entertainment industry, JMU in L.A. is the best way to explore those desires in the warm bubble that is JMU.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NICOLE GOLDSTEIN ('16)

From left: Mike Dolzer, Nicole Goldstein, Morgan Williamson, Katie Feinberg, Matt Sampson.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE DOLZER

Dolzer spent part of his time in L.A. interning at Young Hollywood.

'I was always fascinated with London'

BY KATE DESMOND ('18)

I was always fascinated with London – its beautiful architecture, impeccable style, delicious food and people with distinct accents.

When I was accepted to the SMAD program in March 2015, I knew that SMAD could help me make my dream of visiting London a reality. Getting into SMAD as a sophomore, it was helpful to have the option of taking classes over the summer.

I applied for the Semester in London program for the Summer 2016 session. I found out the Thursday before Thanksgiving break that I was accepted. It was the best timing because I was able to share my excitement with my family at Thanksgiving dinner.

We had a few meetings before departing the U.S., which was really helpful. We got to know the program director, Dietrich Maune, and each other. We talked about what to pack – and what not to – as well as money, living arrangements and airplane tickets.

As the time got closer, I grew more excited about the adventure I was about to embark on. I had never been out of the country before studying abroad, so I was ready for the journey.

We arrived in London on May 19. I remember being so amazed by the cars driving on the "wrong" side of the road as we were on our way from Heathrow Airport to Madison House.

I had the opportunity to live with seven other awesome girls in a flat and take classes in one of the most progressive cities in the world. The office door was always open in Madison House, so I frequently popped in to say hello to Mr. Maune and our program coordinator, Kevin Chamberland. They were so helpful and welcoming and made the transition to living in another country easier.

We had classes for four hours at a time, but it was different than what one may think. Our professors lectured for about an hour and a half and then we went on a class outing. Outings included trips to cafes, bookstores and museums.

Some of the classes offered were British Media and Society, London Theatre and Culture By Design. The people on my trip were from various majors: SMAD, Communication Studies, WRTC and others. The beauty of the program was that the classes could be used for WRTC,

SMAD or SCOM credits and well as fulfilling General Education requirements.

I knew while I was abroad how great the experience was, but it didn't hit me until our final banquet. We all received superlatives, and our professors and Mr. Maune spoke. I'll always remember Mr. Maune thanking us for being such a good group and for the wonderful experience he and his family had with us. That moment made me so grateful for the trip. There's nothing to lose. You can travel the world, make new friends and broaden your horizons. As Neale Donald Walsch said, "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone."



Desmond had always wanted to travel to London.



The group had a lot of fun taking a cruise on the River Thames.



Desmond took a trip to Stonehenge while in Europe.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATE DESMOND

Exploring Urbino, Italy

BY JESSICA WILSON ('17)

Urbino is a small, authentic town in Italy overflowing with old Italian history and culture. This past summer, I was fortunate enough to be part of the Documenting a Community program and submerge myself in everything the town had to offer – including the overwhelming amount of pizza. The program lasted four weeks, which was just enough time to feel at home and become a “regular” at my favorite gelato shop.

The program offered three sections: magazine, multimedia and promotional video. As a writer for the magazine section, it was my job to complete a feature story and photo package on a local jeweler who worked in a shop tucked behind the ancient walls of the town. Each student worked closely with an interpreter from the University of Urbino – without my interpreter, I never would’ve been able to complete my story. The Urbino program is especially valuable for media students because we were able to learn about a foreign place through our feature stories, videography and photography.

Our typical day started with a hot cup of espresso and a Nutella-filled croissant. After our breakfast, we walked 25 minutes to class. Although it was quite the hike each day, I quickly learned to appreciate the view of the mountains. Plus, the walk helped me burn off all my daily pizza and gelato calories. Class consisted of photography lectures, section lectures, one-on-one time with my editors and a basic Italian language class. The professors were phenomenal, each in their own ways. I had the opportunity to work closely with Susan Biddle, former White House and Washington Post photographer, and Susan West, co-founder of Health magazine and award-winning executive editor of various magazines. After our classes were over, we headed out for in-depth interviews.

Our weekdays were always devoted to our stories, but our weekends were designated for traveling. I visited Venice, Florence, then Rome. Although Urbino was unique in its own way, it was refreshing to leave town for the weekend. Weekends were thrilling – traveling by train to foreign places with new friends felt spontaneous and made my experience memorable. Traveling around Italy gave me a new sense of independence. After our three-day weekends came to an end, I always felt relieved to go back to our tiny town without tourists flooding the streets.

Those four weeks in Italy will forever hold a special place in my heart, and the people and places have forever changed me. I never knew that studying my passions in a foreign country could have such a lasting impact on my life.



Jessica Wilson and Susan West, a magazine section editor from California.



The group got to know each other really well during their summer in Urbino.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JESSICA WILSON

'Then Ireland happened'

BY COREY TIERNEY ('15)



From left: Grace Reddish, Kathryn McDearis, Stephanie Harris, Corey Tierney, Jessica Williams, Sean Dolan, Sarah Freeze.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEPHANIE HARRIS ('14)

I thought a lot about transferring.

Knowing my trademark reluctance to change, I probably wouldn't have gone through with the plan. It was a regular notion, nonetheless.

My first two years at JMU weren't what your average Duke would call picturesque. Dorm life was overwhelming for the only child of a divorced family. Rushing organizations required me to prove myself in a way I'd never seen before. I preferred watching a new episode of "Survivor" to dinner with strangers.

Such a sob story, right?

Well, fast forward a few years, and I can proudly say I never transferred and my bachelor's degree has a stoic spot in my home.

But the turning point didn't happen at JMU. That revelation hit me about 3,500 miles east. Months before graduation, I wrote a column for The Breeze about leaving college that had the following phrase: "Then Ireland happened."

That's where my love for college began. That's where I found my passion. That's where life went from a gloomy haze to a clear, sunny, straightforward path.

Sparing anxious "Locked Up Abroad" daydreams, I accepted the adventure of a lifetime to participate in Ireland In Text and Image (now named Ireland: Media, Culture and Society), the SMAD-sponsored six-week study abroad program.

Not to be dramatic (as if I haven't already), but that trip reigns as the best decision I've ever made.

In just a month and a half, I was able

to improve my writing skills two-, maybe even three-fold, experience a new culture, meet 13 lifelong friends, delve into pop culture in a way I never thought possible and make contacts that would eventually lead to a rewarding two-year student job.

While there, we were asked to write travel pieces. Some had loose constructs (first impressions, favorite moments, etc.), but most were open-ended. As someone who found personal writing clichéd, I was scared. A little annoyed, too, but mostly scared. Why did I need to write about myself? Who cares about me? All of my writing at this point had either been features, where I'm able to tell someone else's story, or editorials, where I got to argue a point with objective analysis.

I never expected a travel journal to improve my writing.

I think you could call it self-discovery. By looking introspectively and documenting this journey that was miles away from my skill set, I tapped into a new side of writing. By learning how to document my own emotions, it helped me write about others' in features. By analyzing my own feelings, I'm able to show passion and empathy in editorials.

But the trip wasn't all just some figurative slam poetry night at a coffeehouse where we swapped tears and grew as people. We also got to experience things that were, for lack of a more eloquent word, amazing.

As a pop culture and media obsessive, I was on cloud nine. We met Zachary Quinto ("American Horror Story," "Star Trek")

and Will Forte ("Saturday Night Live") and attended film festivals, arts festivals and countless theater performances. We hit the pavement – sometimes literally – and heard local pub shows that were traditional (or "trad") and contemporary alike.

And what this trip does right is the mix of both tourism and acclimation. Yeah, we kissed the Blarney stone, but we also rode bikes with children on the Aran Islands. Of course we saw the Cliffs of Moher, but not before we sang along with buskers on the streets of Dublin as the sun rose behind us.

Apart from the portfolio, the photos or the stories, I could argue that the most lasting impression was my fellow classmates. There's a sort of unbreakable, unique bond that manifests while traveling with someone. The connection, I think, spawns from these people being the only sense of home you have while so far removed from your comfort zone.


One of our advisers, retired JMU School of Theatre and Dance professor Roger Hall, told us on our last day that no one will ever know exactly what the trip meant to us.

Nothing rang more true after six weeks.

And whenever you're asked about a program like this, you always get the same variations of the same questions: Is there anything you wish you would have done differently? Do you have any regrets? Is there anything you wish you would've known before leaving?

My answer? Not a damn thing.

Learn more at jmu.edu/SMAD

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is seen from behind, looking into a dark studio. Several large, bright rectangular light panels are suspended from the ceiling, illuminating the scene. In the background, a computer monitor displays a blue screen with some text.

Kamryn Comer ('17) works in the SMAD studio in Harrison Hall. The studio was recently updated with new set decorations and equipment.

Front and back cover photos by
James Allen ('18)